ROBERT BREER: DADANIMATOR

The arc of Robert Breer's creative life is so anchored in the fine art world of painting, sculpture and avant-garde film that to savor it fresh again, at this festival, is to be reminded of the deeply complex lineage all animators share. Having completed his latest film in 2003, 50 years after his first, Breer continues to demonstrate and embody the vitality of experimental animation, even as that term undergoes reappraisal.

Born in 1926, Breer grew up building model airplanes and drawing cartoons in Detroit where his father was one of the principal engineers at Chrysler, chiefly responsible for introducing aerodynamics to automobile design. As an undergraduate art major at Stanford he was attacked for painting like Mondrian, instead of following the social realism of his teachers. In 1949 Breer came to Paris and studied on the G.I. Bill at the studio of Ossip Zadkine. He immersed himself in the hard-edged abstraction of Neo-Plasticism, producing and exhibiting elegant canvasses of flat, angular shapes which seem in retrospect ready to slip into motion. He began a series of film experiments in 1952, and in 1955 made "Image Par Images," the first fine art edition flipbook for the influential *Le Mouvement* exhibit, the first show of kinetic art (which included Duchamp, Calder and Tinguely, among others). By 1956 Breer had exclusively moved to ("backed into," as he says) filmmaking and, upon relocating to New York in 1959, broadened his work to include kinetic sculpture and mutoscopes.

The shift to animation involved a radical reinvention of accepted practice. Instead of merely dissecting and rearranging his formal designs as a temporal collage, Breer intervenes during shooting and editing -- spontaneous, playful actions resembling jazz improvisation. There is a pervasive feeling of randomness colliding with order; structures and relationships appear and recede slyly, subverting expectation. Design, like his sense of timing, becomes compressed, a shorthand. Challenging the cinematic mandate for narrative continuity, Breer creates a cinema of discontinuous, saccadic angularity, formal yet brimming with personal reference and wit.

Like Emile Cohl (the caricaturist who reverted to stick-figures), whom he consciously mimes in *LMNO* (1978), Breer undergoes a kind of regression from the established elegance of painting to the more primitive, intimate gesture of the sketch, often with blunt markers and crayons on index cards. Like his friend Jean Arp, who famously tore up his canvas and flung the pieces on the floor to discover a more satisfying design, Breer often employs chance procedures in sequencing to create a wide range of visual experience--from collisions of disparate sequential themes to suggestions of simultaneity.

It is impossible to see Breer's films without being reminded of the art world movements and ideas that influenced him: Dada's anarchy, Abstract Expressionism's action, Pop's appropriational fun, Minimalism's severity. Yet this heady mix is often tossed up with snatches of cartooning as children, rats, pocket knives, cats and nudes tumble through the timescape. How do we interpret these icons? Are they aspects of a personal narrative, breathing the complications of familial life and love? Symbols of a footloose nation teetering nonchalantly between war and peace? Illustrations of what art critic Harold Rosenberg called the "anxious object"? Or, as William Carlos Williams put it, "No ideas but in things"?

Breer's "things" take on a loaded intensity in *Recreation* (1956) which features a fragmentary voice-over text delivered in an affectless monotone which may or may not be a description of the cascade of images to follow. The mechanical tempo of the voice, the propulsive staccato of the individual, unrelated frames yields a vision of hallucinatory intensity: the viewer struggles to impose order and meaning only to be tripped up by the sudden appearance of a toy chicken. Unlike *Form Phases IV* (1954), the series of spatial games which are clearly extensions of Breer's painting concerns, *Recreation* represents his effort to construct a stacked collage in time, a series of "unrelationships", similar to the mutoscopes and wall-mounted flipcard constructions to come. As further evidence of symbiosis between filmic image and object, Breer enlarged every frame to 35 mm and mounted them between sheets of Plexiglas to "re-create" a composite window for installation.

The other film from the 50s, *A Man and His Dog Out for Air* (1957), composed of squiggly ink lines that cavort on a white field, is dedicated to his young daughter. It takes the form of a busy, abstract doodle

which ultimately resolves into its eponymous scene, redolent of Calder's circus.

Using innocent names like "creepy," "rug," or "float," Breer has, since the 1960s, created kinetic sculpture in a dazzling array of scale and multiplicity. Designed to resemble overturned teacups, crumpled sheeting, or other vaguely utilitarian detritus, they meander automatically at a snail's pace, altering direction when obstructed. In all of Breer's constructions we see both a keen attention to engineering, materials, and craft, like other minimalist and serial sculpture in vogue at the time. But Breer's work tends toward the unexpected, the parodic-- playfully out of control. The date films, like *69* and *70* on the program, are elegantly designed extensions of the sculpture: precise, hard-edged, repetitive, formalist studies in line and shadow, intended for a gallery space inhabited by floats.

Sound plays a critical role in Breer's work: largely absent, intruding casually at curious moments, often imitating machinery, random ambience, snatches of conversation or radio. The tracks owe much to John Cage in their refusal to organize the visuals into a dramatic narrative. *Fist Fight* (1964) is one of the few examples of continuous music which might shape the animation. But not only does Breer subvert the music of Stockhausen (itself already the epitome of "difficult") by using a muffled microphone and including the audience's extraneous post-concert chatter, he plays Satie-like tricks by offering one false start and climax after another.

The other anomalous example is the music video *Blue Monday* (1988), a commercial collaboration with Weimaraner artist William Wegman for the techno group New Order, in which the musicians take delight in thumbing through Breer's flipbooks.

During the 70s and 80s, as Breer's work becomes more complex in technique and personal associations, it also achieves the level of poetry. He has in a sense found a groove: an effortless language balancing mimesis and abstraction, photography and drawing, object and image, sexual desire and the domesticity of family life. Home movies loosely rotoscoped in crayon collide with mythic American icons of baseball, airplanes, telephones and, well, take your pick. The mysterious objects of *Recreation*, the eccentric rhythms of perception, the witty scribbles, all have now taken on the familiarity of street corner argot, graffiti for the mind, and while still open to multiple interpretations, one feels able to speak more of content and meaning than mere form.

To call Breer an experimental animator correctly places him in the family of Richter, Fischinger and Lye. Yet regardless of the tools we use, all animators can learn from Breer's gift: his mischievous spirit of inquiry, neither heavy nor aerodynamic, which conveys delight in discovering simple truths.

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PROGRAM

Form Phases IV. 3:30. 1954
Recreation. 2:00. 1956
A Man and His Dog Out for Air. 3:00. 1957
Blazes. 3:00. 1961
69. 5:00. 1969
70. 4:25. 1970
Fist Fight. 8:35. 1964
LMNO. 10:00. 1978
Swiss Army Knife with Rats and Pigeons. 6:00. 1980
Bang! 8:00. 1986
Blue Monday. 1988 (don't know running time)
What Goes Up? 4:46. 2003

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